

SEEK YE FIRST THE KINGDOM



HELEN F. HUNTINGTON

From your S. S. class
in remembrance
of the Bible Story
contest

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Seek Ye First the Kingdom

The Boy in the Bronze Mask

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FOREWORD.

One day a boy wearing a bronze mask and riding a white horse came into Jerusalem. After he entertained the people with juggling tricks, for which they gave him coins, he was seen to throw them to a beggar at the gate. All this caused those who saw him to wonder about him, especially Ira and Rezia, two Jewish boys.

Rezia, who was studying to become a lawyer, had befriended the mysterious stranger; but Ira thought the boy a spy. Not only was he suspicious of everyone, but he did not want the girls to play in the grotto which Zorah, his cousin, had found and had told him about.

This was at the time when James and Peter were preaching, and the Believers were being persecuted in Jerusalem. Ira, having seen Zorah and Dinah, her hand-maiden, go up to the temple, tried to make trouble for them because they were Believers. Dinah's brother had been imprisoned for a crime which no one thought he did. Ira, knowing the boy was not shrewd, asked him to help snare the masked rider. Their plans do not work out quite as they expected. Ira is not blamed but another.

Not having been caught in this trick, Ira still tried to make trouble, now for the girls. This resulted disastrously for him and he disappeared. No one could find a trace of him anywhere.

By this time several refugees were living in the grotto, and the girls were having difficulty providing food for them. An enemy, the boy in the bronze mask, overheard the refugees and their protectors talking in the grotto. In order to even the score with Rezia, he decided to tell the secret. In escaping, he fell. While helping him, the girls made a horrifying discovery.

When the boy came to himself, he was surprised to think the girls were helping him. They told him of Jesus and of the wonders Peter performed. Unexpectedly they received a message from Ira, who had changed very much. The greatest surprise of all they found when they reached the grotto.



CHAPTER ONE.

The Grotto Secret.



LOOK, Ira, there's the boy I told you about, the boy in the bronze mask. You wouldn't believe my tale, and now you can see it was true."

The two Hebrew boys, Ira and Rezia, stopped near the large entrance of Herod's hippodrome, in Jerusalem, to watch the approaching rider curiously, for everything about him was odd, most of all his perfectly fitted mask of thin bronze covered with soft brown leather, such as the Greeks skillfully made. His horse very unlike those of Palestine was slender, and beautifully formed, and of the color of dark desert honey.

As the masked boy came to a halt, a crowd gathered about him, all abuzz with curiosity. He took from a leather pouch three ivory balls with which he performed a few tricks, tossing them from him with a peculiar rotary

motion which caused them to curve back within reach of his very nimble fingers. He also played a few tricks with arrows, standing on his costly saddle cloth while his mount pranced gently as though to show his master's skill.

"He's the son of some Greek stroller of course," said one of the crowd, as he threw the boy a penny.

A prosperous looking young man tossed a silver coin after the penny, but the young performer paid no attention to the coins until his performance was ended when he dismounted, picked up the coins, and made a sweeping bow of thanks.

A big husky Macedonian boy now shoved his way to the front of the throng. "I'm going to have a look behind that mask," he told his fellows with a wide grin. He strode boldly toward the masked boy who neither spoke nor retreated, but merely touched his horse on the shoulder. The animal responded by a quick savage gesture toward the bold fellow who barely escaped from the open jaws.

The crowd laughed uproariously at the crestfallen boy, but a man who stood to one



“Then read this letter aloud.”

side shook his head seriously. "The horse is dangerous and should not be allowed here where children play so often. The magistrate must be told of this."

"No," snapped the masked boy. He looked anxiously over the crowd until he noticed Rezia's pleasant, wholesome face. "Can you read?"

Rezia nodded. His father was a highly educated rabbi, and he was already, at thirteen, studying under a doctor of law.

"Then read this letter aloud," requested the masked boy, taking a small script from under his tunic, and handing it to Rezia who read its brief message in a clear voice that carried distinctly to the edge of the crowd:

"The boy in the bronze mask is free to go and come anywhere in Judea, as he pleases, unhindered and untouched. He is under the protection of Roman authority. Signed: Claudius Lysias."

"Ah, ha! Under Roman protection," muttered the man who would have summoned the magistrate; "then he is of some importance."

The masked boy nodded his thanks to Rezia, mounted, and rode away without a backward look.

Ira dashed after him to return within a few minutes very red of face from hard running. "He is not what he appears, for he needs no money," he panted. "He threw both coins to a beggar at the gate."

"No doubt he's a spy in the Roman employ," cried the Macedonian bully. "Look out for him, everybody."

"I came near forgetting my message for Zorah's father," exclaimed Rezia suddenly. "Come with me, Ira, and let us tell the girls about our mysterious stranger whom they'll want to see for themselves. You know it's one of the rules of our band to share everything equally."

"I wish we hadn't taken the girls into our band," grumbled Ira.

"Why, we didn't. They took us in," laughed Rezia. "The whole idea of a club was Zorah's, and you were glad enough to join, as you very well know, Ira. Besides where could we find a meeting place like Zorah's lovely big garden all to itself in that

quiet place, with not a single grown person to be disturbed by our fun?"

"It's a fine place enough," admitted Ira grudgingly, "but Zorah is so bossy and high tempered she riles me. Her parents let her do exactly as she pleased while she was sick so long, that now she thinks she owns the earth."

Rezia laughed again. "Just like somebody else I know," he observed. Rezia lived up to the meaning of his name "delight," without knowing it, for he was always naturally sunny, kind, and thoughtful for others even in his play. Ira, who was his opposite in almost every way, could never feel very angry with Rezia who often laughed him out of ugly moods. Ira was the youngest son of a publican or tax collector, a shrewd, quick-witted boy who was always looking for ways to profit himself.

The times were growing hard in Jerusalem, for the famine foretold by the prophet, Agabus, was beginning to be felt among the poor of the city, especially the followers of Christ who were not then called Christians, for that came later at Antioch, but Believers. Peter

was preaching and doing wonderful works in the name of Jesus Christ daily, but he was in danger of arrest or worse, for Herod Agrippa had begun to persecute Believers cruelly. The Jews were bitterly opposed to the teachings of Christ, too, as they did not believe in him because they looked for a wonderful king who should restore Jerusalem to them by might and earthly pomp.

Zorah met the boys at her garden gate. "The most delightful thing has happened," she cried happily. "While father was leveling the ground way back against the wall where I wanted my birthday pavilion to be built, he dug through the roof of a grotto that must have been lived in centuries ago, father says when the Babylonish kings raided Jerusalem. A tunnel connects the grotto with a natural cave in the ravine of Kedron. Father says we may have the grotto for our meeting place. Isn't that good?"

Full of excitement the boys followed Zorah and her handmaiden and chum, Dinah, to the secluded end of the large, high-walled garden. Zorah's father was clearing out the dirt which had gathered during the ages from

a round rock walled hole whose stone steps were as solid as though they had been set up that very day. "Keep back of me all of you," ordered Lemuel, Zorah's father, when he had lighted his screened lamp and started down the black tunnel, "for there may be holes of great depths along this ancient passage."

The tunnel turned out safe enough, though cluttered with stones that had dropped from the jagged walls and ceiling, as well as earth. It led to a roomy cave whose stone benches showed that it had at one time been used. The exit was choked with the dust of centuries, piled up by the rain that had flooded the ravine countless times.

"We'll have the cave all to ourselves," gloated Zorah, "for no one ever comes down this steep, lonely ravine, except once in awhile a shepherd seeking a stray lamb; and anyhow father is going to cover the entrance with rocks and thorn screens so that it won't be noticed at all from the outside."

"Oh, what fun to have a secret meeting place like this one," laughed Rezia.

"Mind you, it is to be a dead secret with just us four," Zorah charged everybody.

"Promise you'll not say a word about it to anyone, you two," she urged the boys. They complied willingly.

"Let us name ourselves the Grotto Band," suggested Rezia eagerly.

"A good name," approved Lemuel, who never wearied of pleasing his only child. "Mind you do not abuse the freedom I've given you by doing anything here that will harm yourselves or others. Come along back to the garden, and you shall all help me set out a screen of bushes and vines to hide your grotto entrance from other parts of the garden."

Several hours had passed before Rezia thought of the masked boy. When he told the story it interested the girls immensely in spite of their excitement over the grotto. "I think he must be royalty in disguise," said romantic Dinah who loved poetry and the ancient folklore of her race.

"He's a spy," Ira was sure, "and I am going to find out where he lives, and just who he is. I know a chap who will help me shadow him. We can set a trap—"

"No you can't," broke in Dinah angrily,

“for it’s against our club rules to do anything dishonorable. You can’t stay with us and break our rules.”

Ira’s sharp black eyes snapped fire. “Who are you to give me orders, sister of a jail-boy?”

Poor Dinah! She shrank as though she had been struck in the face, for her older brother had indeed been imprisoned for a theft which he vowed he had not committed. The disgrace had hurt his family cruelly. Now he snared sparrows and sold them for a living, in the lower end of the fish market. It was a poor business, for the sparrows brought only a farthing a pair, and only the very poorest of families bought them.

Zorah’s hot temper blazed forth at the insult to her dearest friend, for though Dinah was paid for her actual services in Zorah’s very well-to-do family, she was treated as an equal. “If you were not my cousin, I would have you put out of my garden right now,” retorted Zorah angrily.

“Just you try putting me out,” growled Ira, “and I’ll give your secret away to the Romans.”

“My secret? What do you mean?” demanded Zorah briskly enough, but the sudden fading of her healthy color told of anxiety, if not actual alarm.

“Your secret business in the house on the Hill of the Synagogues, where you and Dinah have been going stealthily for ever so long.”

“So you’ve been spying on us, have you?”

“No, but I happened to see you one morning early, and since then I’ve found out that you two have something to hide, something that would cause the Romans, if they knew it, to seize the whole garden, especially now that the grotto and cave have been discovered.”

Surprised at the utterly unexpected threat, Zorah could only look appealingly at Dinah who shared a secret which not only meant so much to both of them, but which, if discovered, would bring danger and disgrace upon their people.

Rezia broke the tense silence. “Shame on you, Ira, to say such an unfriendly thing,” he chided the rude boy. “You know you don’t mean a word of it.” There was something so kind and gracious about Rezia that he rarely ever failed to win his way.

"I mean what I said," insisted Ira. "I'll take nothing like that from a girl, least of all from the sister of a thief."

Rezia now saw that Ira had really frightened Zorah whom he had never known to fear anyone or anything before, and his heart sank with a nameless dread. She must be in a serious scrape of some kind, and needed help. Well, he would give her all the help he could. In a pinch he could coax his very important father to help a friend out of trouble. "Let's forget this little quarrel," he advised as cheerfully as possible, "and start fixing up the grotto for our next meeting. Don't you worry, Zorah, for Ira won't do anything that will get his cousin into trouble."

Zorah wished with all her heart that Ira had never joined the little band, for she had always disliked him personally and had taken him in only because she felt obliged to favor a kinsman. It would not do to displease him in any way after this, lest he carry out his dreadful threat. She needed the grotto very much to guard the secret which was becoming daily more difficult and dangerous. "It will be nice to have a little furniture in the grotto,"

she suggested as brightly as possible, trying to take Rezia's view of the quarrel, "a few benches and a table for writing and little feasts on special occasions."

"That's so. Ira, you can make the furniture," suggested Rezia, "and I'll furnish the material and help, as you direct."

Every Hebrew boy of those days was obliged to learn a trade no matter how rich he was, or he would be called shiftless and no-account. Ira had chosen carpentry because he liked to work with tools. He was proud of his skill, and Rezia's offer to work under him pleased him enough to put him into a fairly good humor, so he agreed to do the wanted work after school hours. "But I meant what I said," he flung back over his shoulder, as he walked out of the garden. "You girls just keep that in mind."

CHAPTER TWO.

The Summons.

DINAH came running to the sunny side porch where Zorah was sewing her morning stint, wiping her soapy hands excitedly. "A royal litter stopped at our gate," she announced, "and a stranger is at the front door."

Zorah's mother left her task at the linen table at once. It was the regular day to make garments for the poor, and she was measuring off cloth for the neighbor who had come in to do the cutting, a member of the sewing group. "I will find out what the stranger wants," she said quietly; yet not without anxiety, for any summons of royalty, in those days of Roman rule in Judea, was dreaded by all Hebrews.

She returned very soon. "The stranger is a tirewoman in Herod's household," she explained. "She brings a message for Zorah, from the king's young niece. Zorah, you may go and talk to her. Smooth your hair and

straighten your garment—there, you look very neat and nice.”

The tirewoman, elderly and very dignified, gave Zorah a stiff greeting nod. “The king’s niece, the Princess Cleomene, who is making a long palace visit, wishes you to fetch her the bird she heard singing so beautifully in your garden. She will buy it. You must bring it to her yourself so that you can tell her how to care for it,” was the woman’s message.

“Sell my Persian nightingale!” protested Zorah. “Oh, no, indeed. Not for his weight in jewels, would I give up my dearest pet.”

The woman smiled sourly. “Do you not know that the will of royalty is an order? You may be thankful the princess will buy your bird, for she could easily have it seized at any time.”

Of course, Zorah knew that. Often had she heard the old men and women of her race crying aloud at the Wailing Place because of their subjection to a heathen race. Her elders often spoke bitterly of the oppression of the Romans who were then the greatest power in the world, and who ruled Judea very harshly in most ways; but she had never felt their

power herself until now. She knew in her heart that she would have to give up her pet to save her family from trouble.

Keeping back her angry tears just then was the hardest task the rather spoiled girl had ever done in her twelve years of soft and pleasant living. She loved the bird dearly, for it had helped her through a long weary season of illness, with its never failing music. She had named it Cyrus for the great Persian king who so wonderfully befriended the Jews in their captivity in Babylon.

"Then, if I must go with you, please wait till I can dress," the girl requested of the grim messenger. "And will you please let my handmaiden go with me? She always attends me outside of my own house."

"Yes, she may go. There is a litter at the gate for you. Be prompt."

"The princess is a thief, then, like all the Herods," Zorah told Dinah while the two girls dressed in their best costumes for the forced trip. "And I must part with the dearest pet I ever had just because we Hebrews are Roman subjects and can't help ourselves."

"Don't cry," begged Dinah. "You don't

want the princess to see you in tears, do you?"

"No—no, indeed." Zorah ran to dash fresh water all over her face, and wipe her eyes dry. "She shall not gloat over my heart-ache, and she shall not have my bird long, either."

"What do you mean?" wondered Dinah.

"In the first place I will tell the princess that the bird must be placed in some part of the garden to keep it healthy, and she will probably let me pick out the spot. Then I'll get Rezia to climb over the wall some evening at dusk and feed Cyrus poisoned figs. I'd rather have him die than belong to this mean princess."

Dinah shook her head as she knelt to fasten the laces of her friend's dainty sandals. "Rezia always helps his friends when he can," she agreed, "but did you ever know him to do a mean or deceitful thing for anyone?"

"No, I never have. But he'll see how I have been robbed, and will—" She broke off with a sigh, knowing very well that she was arranging a vengeful plan and Dinah, her chum disapproved of it, as Rezia would be certain to

do. Well, then she would have to carry out the whole plan herself.

Seated behind silken curtains of the Roman litter, the two girls did not enjoy the novelty of that ride because of their anxiety. They had often seen the Herod's palace, which was larger and more splendid than the temple, enclosed by immense walls, but they had never imagined such splendor as that which greeted them beyond the grand porticos.

The vast halls opened to bed chambers large enough for a hundred guests at the time, furnished in Roman style with splendid couches of gold and silvered ivory, embroidered hangings, richly-colored wood floor coverings from Egypt, and pearl-inlaid chairs. The day rooms were even more amazing in numbers and richness. In fact, the palace was a city within itself, so vast and gorgeous that the visiting girls had the feeling of treading through a long golden dream. It made them afraid of the power behind all that dazzling splendor.

In a grandly furnished apartment stood a plain, pale, rather small girl wrapped in a white wool cloak, for the sunless room was

as cold as a cellar on that early spring day. Surely that thin little person could not be the princess Cleomene, thought both the Hebrew girls at the same moment. They soon found she was indeed a royal maiden.

“Oh, you have brought the nightingale!” she exclaimed with a smile, as she spied the plain little red-brown bird perched on Zorah’s wrist. “I want him here with me because he reminds me of my home. In the Emperor’s garden near us in Rome are two nightingales brought from Britain, that sing beautifully, but only at night. Why does this one sing daytimes?”

“Because he is happy,” answered Zorah, “and also, perhaps, because he is so near his native land.”

“Come closer so that the bird will see that I mean him no harm,” ordered the princess. “My dearest friend, who lives ten miles from Rome, often spent weeks with me, and every night we sat together on the terrace listening to the nightingales and talking so happily. She does not know where I am, no one knows but my father who is now very far away, and I must not even write her for fear my letter

might fall into enemy hands. This bird will make me feel a little bit at home in this strange land, I think." She might have added "with these unfriendly relatives," for Herod was a cruel, hard man, as he had given the Jews to know only too well, and his haughty wife was hardly kinder.

"Cyrus will be homesick, and may not sing at all," offered Zorah, with a gentle stroke on the reddish wings.

"He can't help but be happy in the lovely palace gardens," declared Cleomene, "for they are the most beautiful in Judea. I have already secured a large, handsome cage for him."

"If you want Cyrus to be pleased, hang his cage in a place as much like his home spot as possible," advised Zorah. "Maybe I had better show you where he would like best to be."

"Oh, yes, do. Come, then, into the garden. Jason, follow us with the cage you brought in this morning," the princess ordered the slave who stood in the doorway as motionless as a statue.

Herod's garden was an earthly paradise. Its silver sanded walk shaded with palms and

camphor trees were bordered with every known variety of spring blossoms. Fountains played on lawns dotted with snowy marble statues of Greek and Roman heroes, where stately peacocks wandered at will. Thorn-bordered plots contained deer and other beautiful and harmless animals from foreign lands. Here and there among densely leaved trees were chained bears and leopards. One could not see all the garden's beauties in a single day.

"This is the best place for Cyrus' cage," Zorah picked out a spot near the old town wall with a view to a possible scaling by some friend of hers, between two flowering trees. She thrust her pet into the big silver cage and hung it on a low limb, with the help of the slave. The bird paid no attention to its lovely surroundings but crumpled down on the cage floor forlornly.

"He'll be lonely for awhile, just as I am," said the princess wistfully. Somehow, Zorah could not dislike the princess she had so fully made up her mind to despise, for she was just a lonely homesick girl trying to make the best of unfamiliar surroundings and people.

"He'll be lonely for awhile, just as I am."



Herod's family had been complete strangers to her before her father had sent her secretly to Jerusalem to hide her from a kinsman who wanted her money and title for his own daughter.

"I shall stay out here awhile and try to get acquainted with Cyrus," the princess told the Hebrew girls. "My tirewoman will pay you and send you home safely. Good-by."

"Of course I shall not spend this money," Zorah said to Dinah when she carried the pouch of gold into her own house half an hour later, "because it will not be mine when Cyrus is dead."

The next day another summons came from the princess. The bird would not eat, and its mistress was afraid it would starve; so she wanted Zorah to come over and feed it. Zorah sat very still for a moment or two after she received the message. Tears of pity for her pet brimmed over in spite of her resolution. Only five minutes' work would settle everything, for she had only to mix the juice of fresh mandrake with fig pulp which Cyrus loved, and he would die without pain very

shortly. She had the mandrake ready for use.

"The princess shall not keep my bird," she decided for the third time. "I have the right to do what I will with my own property."

"You are right," agreed Dinah very seriously. "That is you could do as you pleased if you were not a Believer. What would Jesus have done in your place, Zorah?"

That was the test of all their conduct, and it never left the girls in doubt. It did not fail Zorah now. The fierce anger died out of her rebellious heart as the love of Jesus came into it. "I must not kill my pet, of course," she answered, "but help him to be happy so that he may give the lonely princess comfort. Dinah, I would not be a good Believer had I not you to help me over my selfishness. Now we shall go to the palace in the right spirit."

Cyrus ate willingly from his mistress' hand, to the great delight of the princess. "You are very kind and friendly, both of you," she told the girls heartily. "I really wish we could be friends and meet often."

"So do I," admitted Zorah frankly, "but of course that cannot be, for princesses do not

have common friends. The king would not allow that."

"Especially Hebrew friends," sighed Cleomene. "I am not allowed any friends of my own class because everyone who knows me has been told that I was drowned accidentally, on a pleasure trip."

Of a sudden her wistful eyes brightened with hope. "Oh, I know a way," she exclaimed with due caution and a quick glance about her. "I will order you both to come every day to this garden to care for my bird, for pay. It will be a matter of business, and no question will be asked."

No one objected to that arrangement. Neither the king nor the queen saw much of Cleomene, nor cared much how she fared so long as she caused them no bother. They were willing that she should spend her money for any pleasure that suited her royal class. All they cared about was her safety; so the house officer issued a permit for Zorah and Dinah to enter the palace garden daily, for the business of tending the princess' pet bird, and everything went very well. The visits soon grew very pleasant to all three girls. The

more they saw one another, the better they liked one another, and the less lonely Cleomene became.

Zorah divided the first week's wage equally and gave half to Dinah to help her widowed mother until Hanan's name could be cleared of disgrace and he could find paying work.

"My half is needed by the refugee Believers," she said, speaking very softly for fear of being overheard and her secret revealed. "Let us go on to Mark's house and leave the money there for Peter to spend, as he knows best who needs it."

Ten years had passed since Jesus had died on the cross to redeem the world, and his followers scattered about Palestine, were many. Their number increased daily; but they had many foes, chiefly among the rich and powerful who feared the new religion of love and mercy would break their cruel power. Peter, the leader of the Apostles, was then the great Christian power in Jerusalem. His works and wonderful teaching had attracted country-wide attention.

The Roman authorities watched Peter very closely. The rich and important Jews feared

his power and wished to put him out of their way for good. The common people adored him, especially the sick and afflicted. The poor carried their sick into the streets and laid them on pallets where Peter's shadow would fall upon them as he walked about the city, and they should be healed. Others who had no relatives or friends to carry them out of their miserable homes sent bits of linen for Peter to touch, so great was their faith in his power of healing. They were never disappointed. Peter's favorite home was that of Mary, mother of the Disciple Mark, a devoted Christian woman of position and means.

Zorah and Dinah kept close watch for prying eyes as they walked up the Hill of the Seven Synagogues where was Mary's home. "I am more afraid of Ira than of anyone else in the world," whispered Dinah who was naturally timid.

"Don't you worry about him, for he will not dare make trouble for me," Zorah tried to make herself believe; yet in her heart she feared that very event.

CHAPTER THREE.

Mischief Astir.

IRA picked his way distastefully between the ill-smelling fish stalls of the lower market to the spot where Hanan, the disgraced brother of Dinah, squatted before his poor stock in trade, half a dozen pairs of sparrows dangling from a wooden rack. He had not made a single sale that morning and was feeling very blue and discouraged.

“Why don’t you quit this miserable job and make a real start somewhere else, where others do not know about your misdeed?” demanded Ira in a scornful tone which he had lately acquired along with some other unmanly habits. “Say in Hebron. Trade is brisk and money plentiful. There you could set up a fruit stand in the market where the caravans buy their supplies before going into the desert.”

“How can I start anywhere without a farthing to invest?” Hanan sighed.

“You can’t, of course. But I am bringing

you a chance to earn ten pieces of silver by helping me on an easy little job."

Ten pieces of silver! That was a fortune to Hanan just then, for it was the wages of a grown laborer for several months. The mere thought of owning so much money took his breath away.

Just at that moment Rezia came down the market street on an errand, intending to stop at Hanan's stall for a friendly word as he had done ever since Hanan had fallen into disgrace. He wished to assure the discouraged boy that he still had friends who believed him innocent and wanted to prove it. The moment Rezia saw Ira talking with Hanan with such a secret air he suspected that Ira was trying to draw Hanan into some scheme or other, for Hanan was very good-natured and easily led.

For a long while Rezia had tried loyally to overlook Ira's mean traits because the boys had been neighbors and friends since babyhood, and their mothers were life-time friends. Of late Ira's conduct had driven the two farther and farther apart, and Rezia felt

that they would soon have to go separate ways.

He wanted to prevent Hanan from joining the much smarter Ira in any scheme that would bring fresh trouble upon him. He quickly turned back and entered the market square from an opposite direction, directly behind the two whispering boys, and stationed himself back of a post that supported one end of the awning of a deserted fish stall.

"Ten pieces of silver?" repeated Hanan. "Why, we have never had so much money in our home at one time, even while father lived and worked for us."

"But you can have that sum now for your very own, for a few hours' work," Ira assured him.

"What kind of work?" asked Hanan, a little suspicious of Ira's sudden generosity, because the boy had shunned his acquaintance altogether from the day of his disgrace up to that hour.

"Something you'll enjoy, for there's real fun in it, and not much work. Of course Dinah has told you about the mystery boy in the bronze mask? Well, some believe he's the

son of a Roman officer, out spying for his father. For that reason the Greek trader, Antoblus, has offered me twenty pieces of silver to find out secretly who the masked boy is and where he lives. We can earn that reward together."

"How? His horse is as savage as a lion and travels like the wind."

"That's true enough, but we can run the horse down through a trick, by working together."

"Will it be honest work?" Hanan wanted to know. "I do not wish to do anything the least bit wrong, Ira. I really did not steal the perfume from—"

"Never mind about that business now," Ira waved an impatient hand. "You have the chance in hand to make a fresh start. Will you take it?"

"Gladly, if you are sure it is honest."

"Do you think I'd do anything dishonest?" sputtered Ira. "Now listen and do as I say. Meet me at the Jaffa Gate two hours before sunset, and keep watch for the masked boy if you have to wait for me. I have already found out that he is in the city today, and as

"His horse is as savage as a lion."



he entered by the Jaffa Gate, he's likely to go out that way. Of course, he'll avoid the roadway travelers; so he'll cut across the field trail. In fact, I have already found the small sharp tracks of his desert horse along the old sheep trail."

"What about his dangerous horse, that'll fight for him if anyone gets close to him?" inquired Hanan anxiously.

"The horse never makes a hostile move till his master touches his shoulder. We'll see that he doesn't get that signal. Once we get the masked boy off of the horse, and the horse started running, all we'll have to do is hide till the boy starts homeward on foot, and then shadow him."

Ira saw the belated fish merchant approaching his stall, and sauntered away without a backward glance. Pretty soon Hanan folded a bit of old sacking over his rack, swept his tiny square clean, and set off for home with his unsold birds. Rezia performed his errand promptly, intending to see Hanan and warn him that afternoon before the time appointed for the meeting at Jaffa Gate. When he finally called at Hanan's

humble home, in a poor section of the city, Hanan's mother explained that he had gone on an errand for Ira.

Rezia hurried home, asked and received permission to stay out until dark, and then followed the plotters. He learned from the gatekeeper that the masked boy had not passed that way since morning. He went on to the big sloping field where an old sheep trail made a short cut to the Jaffa highway. This field offered many hiding places with its deep gullies, rock heaps, and hut ruins between patches of newly leafed bushes.

Rezia kept sharp watch for the plotters, as he followed the winding trail, and presently caught sight of Ira's familiar striped coat, whereupon he dodged behind a stone heap to watch while he made up his mind what he had better do. Almost at once the boys began pegging something down about twenty feet apart on both sides of the trail in a spot where a few low growing scrub branches covered the trail. He was so intent upon the odd proceedings that he failed to hear the beat of approaching horsehoofs until the plotters darted into a gully and fell flat on their faces.

The boy in the bronze mask was then so close to the trap that Rezia could only dash straight toward him. His feet struck a taut obstruction among the twigs and he fell head-first almost under the feet of the prancing horse. With a startled outcry, the masked boy reined back his mount while Rezia rolled to one side and scrambled to his feet.

"There's danger ahead for you," panted Rezia. "The line that tripped me was set for you, and there may be more farther along. Ride back a piece and cut into the Jaffa Road, by the Spring place."

The masked rider instantly recognized the boy who had read his Roman passport aloud in the market place on the day that the Macedonian bully had tried to unmask him. He had liked Rezia's face then, and he liked it still better now; so he took the advice with a word of hearty thanks.

Alas for Rezia's good intentions! This well-meant advice proved disastrous. As the masked boy came out upon a lonely turn of the Jaffa Road, two ruffians who were following a trade caravan from afar, immediately

perceived their chance of getting a valuable saddle horse without any risk to themselves. Between them they easily contrived to unseat the young rider, catch the horse, and make off with him for the Syrian border.

The worst feature of that mishap was that the masked boy felt sure that Rezia had sent him astray, that he was a tool of the ruffians, and he at once made up his mind to punish Rezia severely. It would take time and planning to find a way that would hurt Rezia as much as the loss of the gallant, loyal little horse hurt its devoted owner, but he would find a way.

Perhaps Rezia was a Believer, thought the bitter mystery boy as he tramped painfully homeward after a long wait in hiding for the friendly dusk to cover his going, for Rezia was certainly a Hebrew, and he had some of the ways that set Believers apart from other people, gentleness, willingness to serve strangers, and keen interest in the teachings of the apostle that had won such wonderful interest in Jerusalem. The masked boy had seen Rezia once standing at the temple gate listening spellbound, to Peter's preaching. He

hoped Rezia was a Believer, for then he could be hurt and shamed in many ways.

Ira and Hanan lay in their gully hiding place for a long while. They wondered if the interfering person whom they had seen but not recognized, had seen them set the lines to trip the mystery boy's horse, and had gone to headquarters to report their mischief and bring serious trouble upon them. When the field began to grow dusky with the deepening shadows of night, they crept homeward, scared and disappointed over their failure.

"If I hear anything about this affair, I'll let you know in time for you to get away," Ira promised his timid companion when they parted for the night. His motive was not so much kindness as caution. He knew Hanan to be rather a dull boy and therefore he would be easy to frighten into a confession if anything was done about their scheme.

That night Ira was troubled by bad dreams. When he woke the next morning, he thought uneasily about the disaster of the day before's scheme. Suppose the mystery boy should have found out Ira's plan and stirred up the anger of his Roman friends? Since he had

obtained the protection of the most powerful Roman officer in Jerusalem, the masked boy could probably have Ira's father discharged from his highly paid office of tax collector which he held by the favor of the Roman officials. This office was much sought after in those days as any important Government job of our own age.

The dread thought frightened Ira and took away all his appetite for breakfast, which caused his observant mother to excuse him from going to school that morning, as he seemed to be sick. His suspense was suddenly ended by Hanan's arrival with good news.

"It was Rezia who turned the mystery boy out of our way yesterday," he stated. "Rezia was at my home last night when I reached there, and he warned me against ever taking part in any such scheme again. I am so thankful it was he who saw us instead of some unfriendly person who would make trouble for us both."

For a moment Ira was greatly relieved; then a surge of fury against Rezia rushed over him like a devouring flame, choking back all his common sense. "I'll pay Rezia well for

his mean turn," he vowed spitefully. "By night he'll be sorry enough that he ever tried to pry into my affairs."

He did not wait for his unreasonable fury to cool but dashed off in head-long haste, leaving Hanan bewildered and worried but far from suspecting the object of Ira's wild flight. "I should not have listened to him in the first place," he murmured as he turned away, "for I never really trusted him as I do Rezia."

Ira ran all the way to Herod's grand quarters, arriving at the garden gate just as the guards were changing for the day. To the guard who came out Ira made a breathless appeal. He wanted to tell an officer something very important. "You can tell me," granted the guard, "and if it's anything worth while, I'll report it to headquarters."

At the moment that Ira began an excited, panting account of a young traitor hiding others in a secret grotto in the garden of Lemuel, the gold-beater, the princess Cleomene passed the gate inside the garden, on her way to the nightingale's cage with a morning tidbit. When she heard, among other names, that of Zorah, daughter of Lemuel,

the gold-beater, she stopped short, slid back the bolt of the gate and flung it wide for a look at the owner of the angry voice. Ira's heated face and snapping eyes convinced her that the boy was trying to make trouble for Zorah and her friends.

"They're all traitors to the Romans," he began, when Cleomene interrupted him with a royal gesture.

"Take that boy to the palace dungeon," she ordered the guard. "He is the enemy of my best friends." To the utterly astonished Ira she said, "Don't you dare so much as speak my friends' names again or I'll have you beaten as well as imprisoned."

Ira's rage cooled as suddenly as though he had been plunged into an icy pool. The guard shoved him into the garden, and ordered him to march along, with a spear prodding his back.

CHAPTER FOUR.

Trouble Looms.

IRA has disappeared!" Rezia told Zorah, as he ran into her grotto garden. "He left home yesterday morning right after breakfast and hasn't been seen or heard of since. His folks fear he was captured by the Arab caravan that passed the city yesterday. You know the Arabs do steal likely looking boys and girls to sell them as slaves in far countries. It would be dreadful if that— Why, Zorah, whatever is the matter?" he broke off to ask, when he noticed that the girl was crying.

"Haven't you heard the dreadful news?" faltered Zorah. "Father has just come home terribly upset from seeing Disciple James killed in the market place by Herod's order. James, the brother of John the Beloved, who never did anything but good to anybody. Oh, Rezia, why was that cruel deed ordered?"

All the color died out of Rezia's very good-looking face, and a shock of horror struck the

boy dumb for a few moments. "Father has often said of late that Herod strives to please the important Jews who favor his rule, the Herodians, as they call themselves. Those Jews want the disciples put out of the way because they have won so many people away from the old laws and customs of their religion, to the loving and helpful ways of Jesus. The Herodians are losing their power for that reason. That must be why they wanted James killed."

"Now all Believers will be in danger, more than ever. And Peter—" Zorah dared not even put her fears into words, so much did she dread the peril which everyone knew now hung over that beloved disciple, who had by his wonderful works and eloquent teachings won thousands to the religion of Christ. Peter had fulfilled all Jesus had expected of him when he changed his given name to Peter, which means a stone, and said he was the rock upon which the church would be built. Peter had organized many churches about the country between helping the sick and needy, and teaching in and about the cities of Judea. He stood very high among the common people

and all who loved truth and righteousness. The Pharisees, however, disliked him on account of his steadily growing power, and as they had much influence, Peter's converts feared them greatly.

The Pharisees had been chiefly to blame for the death of Christ, whom they feared because he won so many hearts away from their narrow, self-righteous teachings. They concerned themselves mostly with outward forms, and looked with contempt upon all who did not believe as they. Of course there were some among them who lived pure and upright lives and obeyed the old laws of Moses in spirit as well as in outward form. Such a Pharisee was Gamaliel, the famous Jewish doctor of law, who had kept the mobs from harming Peter. Under this just and honorable man Rezia had begun to study law, for his father, a very learned rabbi, had great plans for his youngest son.

"I know what you are thinking," said Rezia after a moment of silence. "But the common people love Peter so much, and Herod knows it, that he may be spared for policy's

sake. We shall have to be very careful hereafter."

"We?" Zorah quickly caught up the word. "Oh, Rezia, are you one of us, a Believer?"

"Yes, with all my heart, but this is the first time I have told anyone, for fear of hurting my family. You know how much the Jews of my father's class despise Believers. I do not want my father, the rabbi, despised on my account, you see."

"How did you find out that Dinah and I are Believers?" asked Zorah with a sudden fear that Ira had spied upon and maybe told outsiders her dangerous secret.

"By your changed ways. Of late you have been pleasing others more than yourselves. You are different, both of you."

"We haven't dared to tell anyone for the same reason that you are keeping still," admitted Zorah. "Dinah's people have had so much misery already that they must not have any more trouble. Peter's preaching first won our hearts to Jesus. For quite a long time we have been going to the home of Mark's mother where Peter often visits, to

listen to his teachings. When did you become a Believer, Rezia?"

"I don't know. I have always loved the thought of Jesus, and his teachings have always been in my heart even before I heard Peter. I don't understand it, but soon I shall have to come out for Jesus, no matter what may happen to me. Only I do so dread to disappoint my father, and my teacher whom I love very much even though he has no belief in Jesus."

"I wish to show my faith openly, too. I was going to tell my father this very morning, but now that the killing of James has given Believers so much to fear, I must wait to save father from worry over my safety. Just now Dinah and I have been given real work to do for Christ, by taking charge of four young refugee Believers from Samaria, whose father has had to flee from hostile officers. We want to shelter them in our grotto until their parents can send for them, as they won't be safe anywhere else."

"Does your father know about them?"

"I have told him they are in danger, and he is willing to let them stay in the grotto

awhile. He always helps the needy, you know."

"I can help you, by bringing the refugees here in secret, from the Kedron ravine way, this very afternoon while the road will be almost deserted, on account of the great hippodrome entertainment of the Romans."

The urgent matter was quickly arranged, with the consent of kind-hearted Lemuel, who suspected his daughter's secret by that time and watched over her safety with more than usual tenderness. Indeed, Zorah was so sincere in her Christianity that it showed itself daily in her sweet and thoughtful conduct, and the many little sacrifices that had never entered her mind before Jesus had come into her heart.

Kedron, one of the deepest of the many ravines which gave Jerusalem the appearance of a vast fortress from a distance, had been a common cemetery in the days of Josiah, the godly king who had cleansed the Lord's city of idolatry. Into the brook, which in winter only was a raging torrent, had been cast the ashes and rubbish of heathen altars, idols, and the bones of the heathen priests.

Of course, all that unholy refuse had been carried away centuries ago by rain floods, but the ancient graves remained, sunk deep in the hillside crevices, nearly covered with stones washed down by winter rains, and utterly forgotten.

The ravine looked deserted as usual, but Rezia led the Samaritan refugees down there from the all but deserted roadway beyond the Jaffa Gate. He felt no need of caution once he was out of view from the road, as he had never seen anyone there except a solitary shepherd seeking a stray lamb. The place was shunned because of its ancient association and also because walking there was very rough.

The enemy crouching back of a hillside rock had everything his own way. It was the masked boy who had shadowed Rezia all that day, in the dress of an Arab shepherd, with his face so well covered under the drooping headcloth that his mask was hardly visible except at close range.

Ever since he had lost his beloved horse through Rezia's deceit, as the mystery boy believed, he had thought of nothing but taking

vengeance. From his hiding place he watched Rezia with rising excitement, saw him part the thick thorn scrub that screened the entrance to the ancient cave, and usher his timid, ragged followers into the dark space. He waited awhile before he stole down the ravine and parted the prickly screen to peer into the blackness of the then vacant cave.

Pretty soon he heard the murmur of cautious voices far above him, by which he knew that the cave was connected with some upper room by a tunnel which he groped for and found. He went forward with due caution until he came within sight of the grotto retreat which was dimly lighted from the upper entrance. Zorah and Dinah were there busily transferring food from a large basket to platters which they set on a table before the famished looking refugees. Before they invited their hungry guests to eat, Zorah bowed her head and prayed the Lord Jesus to bless the food and those who should eat it, as well as all Believers.

“So they are all Nazarenes!” the spy told himself, “and of course my enemy is one, too.

Nothing could suit me better than coming on their secret meeting place. Now I can tell of this cave to the Roman authorities who never will allow such a valuable retreat to stay in the possession of the despised Believers. Rezia shall pay well for the stealing of my horse."

He was too much taken up with the thoughts of his vengeance to leave the place cautiously and the sound of his going, slight as it was, caught Zorah's alert attention. With a scared whisper of warning to Dinah, she set down her food platter and started down the pitch black tunnel, praying that the spy's visit might not bring trouble upon her refugees or her parents. She could not have overtaken the spy had not his flowing cloak caught on the thorns of the cave screen and checked his hurried exit.

"Please, please listen to me, whoever you are," she begged when she had caught a glimpse of the strangely masked face. Instinctively she caught hold of his cloak to delay him while she could plead with him for mercy in behalf of the starvings she was trying to shelter.

The boy jerked himself free with an angry exclamation. "You can't trick me," he sneered. "I know you to be a band of thieves because your leader caused my horse to be stolen. By doing that, he got you into the worst trouble of your lives, as you'll soon find out."

He strode wrathfully away, crossed the shallow brook, and started up the sheep trail which led, by many rough winding turns, to the open road. In his scornful haste he neglected watching his steps, and presently he stumbled over the up-tilted end of an almost buried slab that had once covered a grave. His fall broke the thin crust of a rain filled hole into which he dropped like a plummet, clear out of Zorah's view.

The startled girl instantly recognized the stranger's peril and ran to the place where he had disappeared. Nothing showed above the dark surface of the slightly ruffled pool. If the boy had fallen into some rubbish-cluttered crevice, he would surely drown. Thoroughly frightened, Zorah dropped to her knees at the water's edge, and holding fast to the steady slab with one sturdy hand, she



"Help is coming," came a welcome shout.

plunged her free arm into the pool where her groping hand soon found a bit of cloth stretched taut over an obstruction. Feeling along the cloth, she found the boy's shoulder but it was wedged fast somehow. Although she tugged at it with all her might, she could not move it. Meanwhile she prayed fervently for help. If only Dinah had followed her through the tunnel!

"Help is coming," came a welcome shout from somewhere, and the next moment Dinah was beside Zorah. Being small, Dinah found kneeling space on a little rock-shelf at the pool's very surface, and soon she took firm hold of the submerged shoulder, and with Zorah's added strength, freed it. They raised the boy's head above water and finally hauled his limp body over the pool's jagged edge onto the solid ground.

"He's either dead or stunned by his fall," gasped Zorah between panting breaths, for her efforts had made her very tired.

"The mask has been pulled askew, and will suffocate him if he is not already dead," exclaimed Dinah, beginning to tug at the fine leather thongs of the dislocated mask which

was so expertly fashioned that it fitted every feature as smoothly as the skin itself when it was rightly adjusted. Finally she managed to pull the mask down over the wearer's chin. She sprang back with a cry of horror as she saw what the mask had hidden.

CHAPTER FIVE.

The Midnight Miracle.

ZORAH was first to speak. "He is a leper!" she whispered for the mere name of that worst of all plagues was frightening indeed. The disease was so dreadful and so hopeless that its victims were compelled to separate themselves for life from the healthy and clean. Whenever they went out on necessary errands, they had to hide their faces and warn others away by repeated cries of "Unclean! Unclean!"

The law about avoiding lepers was very strict among the Jews who believed it to be deadly contagious. The two girls shrank from touching the plague-stricken boy whose still, pale face bore the glistening, silvery-white marks that everyone feared. Their natural alarm did not make cowards of them however.

"Our Master would not have him to die alone, unclean though he is," said Dinah very solemnly, "and we must not leave him until

we have done all we can to revive him. Let us turn him on his face, with his head slanting downward so that the water will run out of his mouth freely."

This was done, and the boy came to himself after a few moments, rolled over, sat up, and gazed wildly about him. When he perceived that his mask was dislocated and his ghastly secret bared, he clapped both hands over his marked face with a cry of despair. "You two girls saved me from drowning, knowing your danger from touching me," he said between fits of trembling either from cold or misery. "Why did you do it?"

"We did not know about the leprosy till we had dragged you out of the pool and wrenched aside the crooked mask to let you breathe," explained honest Dinah. "But we would have tried to save you even had we known, because our Master would have done that."

"Your Master? Who is he?"

"Jesus of Nazareth. We are Believers."

The boy let his hands fall from his glistening face. "So this is what it means to be Believers?" He exclaimed in wonder. A gleam

of faint relief came into his brown eyes. "I will tell you about myself," he decided. "I am a Varro, a Roman of Italy. When my father was sent to govern Gaul, my mother went with him, and my oldest brother took me to Judea to live with him and a married younger brother, an officer in Herod's army. When I became a leper, my brothers sent for the best doctor in Rome, though they knew that I could never be cured. The doctor said my disease would not be dangerous to others for a full year, or maybe even two years as it takes that long to reach the contagious stage. During that time I could live as always if only the marks of the plague could be hidden; otherwise every one would fear and shun me, and I should have to go to the leper colony.

"Then my brothers had this mask made. They paid a strolling player to teach me a few tricks so that I could pass as a juggler, and thus ride out as I pleased without arousing too much curiosity; they also bought a fine Arab horse and trained him to defend me on command. They gave me a writ of protection from the Roman governor so I was able to go about in peace. If you tell anyone of

my plight, I shall have to go to the colony right away and stay there the rest of my life."

"You will never need to go there," Zorah said with the utmost kindness, "for you can be cured by —"

"Oh, no. There is no cure for leprosy," exclaimed the boy, hopelessly.

"There was none till Jesus came into the world, but he made everything possible. Have you not heard of the cures made by Peter, the disciple of Jesus?"

"Who has not heard of those wonders? But Peter cannot cure me. My brothers had Simon of Samaria come to their home to heal me with his arts, and he failed."

"Oh, but Simon is only a sorcerer who deceived the Samaritans with his arts and claimed to have power from God," broke in Dinah earnestly, for Simon's story was well known to all Believers by that time. "It is true that he was moved by the disciples' preaching and was even baptised by Philip, but he was not really converted, for when Peter caused the Holy Spirit to be brought down upon the converts by the laying on of hands, Simon offered Peter money for the

power to do likewise. Peter chided him for believing that the gift of God could be bought with money and told him his heart was not right with God. That was the reason he could not cure you; he had no power from the Lord Jesus such as Peter has."

"Don't be discouraged because Simon failed," urged Zorah, "for Peter will surely cure you."

"Even if he could cure leprosy which I don't believe," said Varro sadly, "he would not, because we Romans have done him so much harm, even killing James this very day."

"Never mind that now. You go to the temple now, for we do not know how long Peter will be allowed to go among us now that James has been taken. I'll send Rezia down to the cave with dry clothes for you, and then you go straight over to the temple and look for Peter. Even if you can't speak to him, get close enough to touch his garments or to have his shadow fall upon you. I will be near by praying for you, that you may have faith and be healed. We must hurry, for there is not much of the day left."

The boy rose, adjusted his mask carefully, and followed his rescuers into the cave where he waited. Rezia soon brought him dry clothing which he greatly needed as he was chilled to the bone in his drenched garment.

Zorah hurried as she rarely had done, in order to finish her errand before sundown, for it was not customary for a girl of her age to be outside of her home place after the twilight hour. She found the temple approach crowded with the sick, the lame, and the needy as usual, all awaiting Peter's passing, in the hope of obtaining help. As there was no room for her near the entrance, she waited at the edge of the throng, praying earnestly and hopefully. Varro presently appeared and tried to edge into the press that seemed to increase every moment.

At last Peter came to the door. His long day's work was finished and he was turning homeward, but the throng soon stopped him with fervent appeals and a general rush toward him. Varro stood his ground among the milling men until Peter was almost within his reach; then a burly man shoved him

aside and he melted away in the fringe of the crowd.

"Nothing happened to him. Nothing at all," mourned Zorah with a stab of intense disappointment. Seeing that it would be impossible for her to get within speaking distance of Peter, she turned homeward in haste. She was saddened but not altogether cast down, for she thought Varro would have another chance the next day, or the next, if only Peter would be allowed to stay with them.

Alas for her hopes! As soon as Herod saw how much the putting away of James had pleased the important Jews, he had Peter seized and imprisoned. He let it be known that he would turn Peter over to "the people" at Easter time, just as Jesus had been turned over to the mob. This meant that Peter was to die at Easter time.

Herod knew nothing of the power of prayer such as the Believers all over the land sent up to God daily without ceasing, including the Grotto Band which increased in numbers almost every day as Herod's persecutions grew. The band prayed also for the missing boy, Ira, of whom no trace could be found.

When the days of the unleavened bread were finished, Rezia's father gave a feast in honor of his son's thirteenth birthday, for that was the age when well born Jewish boys usually began special training. Gamaliel, Rezia's teacher, was the guest of honor. It was as fine a feast as a rich house could provide, but Rezia did not enjoy it. In fact his mind was not there at all, for he had decided to confess his faith in Jesus that night.

He waited long for his father's invitation to join in his discussion with Gamaliel, of Rezia's future profession, and when it came, he rose and addressed his father with great respect as he had been taught to do. "Please do not make any plans for me, Father," he begged, "for I have no heart for the law calling. I am a follower of Jesus, the Nazarene."

If an earthquake had shaken the big house, the rabbi's astonishment could have been no greater. "What say you?" he asked, half rising. "When did this thing come upon you, my Son?"

"I don't remember the beginning. Always I have loved the very name of Jesus and his teachings have ever been in my heart. I can-

not help it, Father. I must follow Jesus all the rest of my life."

"No!" said the Rabbi in a voice of command, and again, "No." It was to him as though his son had suddenly turned traitor to him.

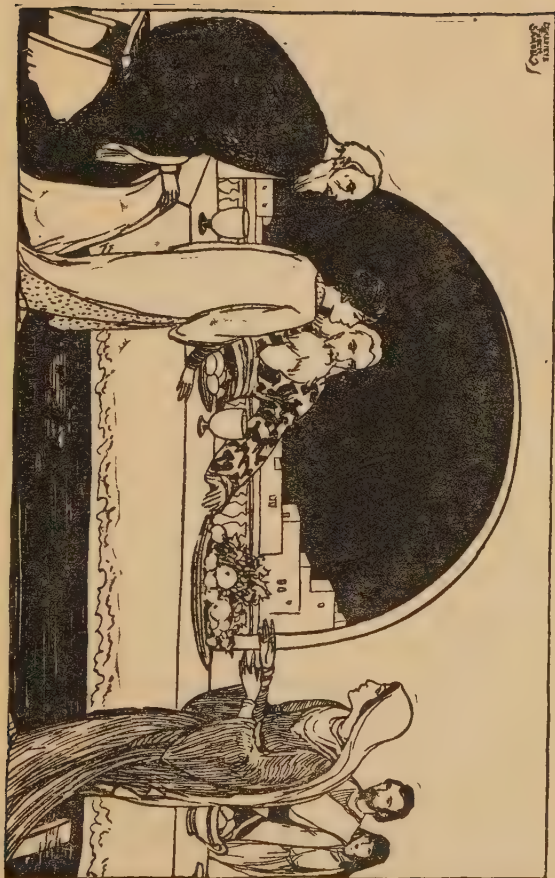
Now Rezia's mother came to the doorway. She had not sat down to the feast because it was not the custom for Jewish women to share in functions of that sort, but she hovered in the hall, waiting, perhaps for the very event that had happened. "Hear me, Rabbi, and Friends," she begged. "It is my fault alone that Rezia is as he is. When he was a baby in arms and ailing a little, I carried him out into the field to play, and there I came upon Jesus teaching a multitude. Mothers wanted to have their babies blessed by Jesus, and when his disciples waved them back, he lovingly invited us all to come close with our children. 'Suffer the little children to come unto me,' he said, 'and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.'

"So I gave little Rezia into the Master's arms and he blessed him. After that the boy was always different from other children, you

yourself have often spoken of that, and even in his play and mirth he was kind and sweet toward others. The reason must be that when Jesus blessed him, he set him apart for his service. Since the hour of that meeting with Jesus I, too, have always believed, but I have not dared to speak of it for fear of disappointing you and hurting your standing as a rabbi."

For a long while no one broke the deep silence that followed the mother's confession. The rabbi's face was very grave, very troubled, but not angry. Perhaps he realized that there was something grand and noble about the religion of the meek and lowly Jesus whom his friends had crucified over ten years ago. Gamaliel, the famous doctor had no word of blame for his favorite pupil. He was a lover of goodness and he approved of the unselfish, noble teachings of Peter whom he had more than once defended from mob injustice, but he did not believe that the lowly Jesus was the king the Jews looked for.

Gamaliel stayed late and talked long with the rabbi, with Rezia listening silently. When he took his leave at last, his host called for a



"So I gave little Rezia unto the Master's arms."

lantern and set off with him, with Rezia beside him. It was a fine clear night full of starry radiance which the houses of the narrow streets almost shut off in many places. They passed near the grim Tower of Antonia, in whose stout stone prison Peter was waiting his death sentence. Rezia thought sorrowfully of how impossible it was for Peter to escape by any ordinary means, chained to soldier guards as he was by day and night, with keepers always on watch outside of the cells.

While crossing the short street that led to the prison gates, Rezia suddenly saw a soft light that was not of the stars, and he stopped unnoticed by his elders, knowing that he was about to see something that was not of earth. Were the thousands of fervent prayers for Peter's release about to be answered?

In another moment a lovely, heavenly radiance played around the huge prison gates, so heavy that no single man could open them. An angel form pressed the gates back noiselessly and led forth a dark clad prisoner, let the gates swing back, and then took soundless flight. No there was no more light except that

of the quiet stars. In the deep midnight stillness Rezia heard the quick, yet soft, tread of sandaled feet passing along an upper street.

Now the rabbi missed his son and called to him sharply. "Saw you not that heavenly light?" the boy whispered as he caught his father's hand.

"The light? Yes, it was from a rush of stars such as I have often seen at this season."

"It was not of the stars, but from an angel of the Lord who opened the prison gates and led forth a man, Peter, I am sure it was."

"The lad has too much imagination," said Gamaliel. "I may have pushed him too hard in his studies. Let him rest for awhile."

"Tomorrow, Rabboni, you will hear strange news of Peter," insisted the boy joyously.

Rezia stayed awake so long that night that he overslept the next morning, to be finally waked by an unusual stir in the house and outside. "The city is all astir with excitement over the escape from prison of Peter," the rabbi, explained the noisy bustle. "Herod is furious. He has already had the guards executed."

“Rhoda, the maid in Mark’s house, told us about it first. It was she who answered Peter’s knock, around midnight, and was so gladdened at the sound of Peter’s voice she could not open the door, and Mark himself let Peter in. His friends have already hurried him away on account of Herod’s great rage.”

“It was our prayers that freed Peter,” declared Rezia. “Oh, Father, surely you believe in Peter now?”

“I know not what to say, Son, but you and your mother are free to believe as you will from now on. Only be very cautious while there is so much danger from Herod’s wrath.”

CHAPTER SIX.

The Faith Prayer.

MY last penny was spent for lentils this morning when I went to the market with our neighbor," Zorah anxiously told Dinah as she dished up the little red savory beans for the midday meal of the grotto refugees. "Food grows dearer every day, and scarcer. Where will the next grotto meal come from?"

"Your good father will help us," Dinah felt sure.

Zorah shook her head. "He cannot. Already he has given twice his just tithe to the temple stewards. Only this morning word came from Cana, from his widowed cousins whose children will starve if he does not provide for them. Of course he will look after them."

The famine foretold by Agabus, the Christian prophet was then causing great suffering to the poor of Judea and the surrounding countries. In fact, all but the rich felt the

pinch of hard times. It began to look as though the grotto refugees, now eight in number, would soon have to leave that friendly cave and shift for themselves as thousands of poor folks were doing. Rezia had bound himself to provide food for the two orphans he had saved from beggary, and his mother was helping him grandly. His parents, too, had many relatives and friends to look after. As the famine might last the year out, or even longer, every one had to save something for future needs.

“Zorah, I think our trouble comes from not having enough faith,” Dinah said after a thoughtful silence, during which she had transferred several little hard baked breads from the oven to a serving platter. “We are praying without the perfect faith that the Lord said we must have. And we must not be working just as we should, or we’d have the things we need. Didn’t Jesus say ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added’?”

“Dinah, you are right,” admitted Zorah. “For two whole days I have not prayed right. My heart has been full of hatred of Herod and

the hostile Jews who caused Peter's arrest."

Both girls felt much happier when they sat down to their simple meal after a fervent prayer for help. "I am glad this is our day to visit the princess," observed Zorah cheerfully, "for we always have a pleasant time with her."

"I wonder if it will be safe to go over there now that Herod is so angry about losing Peter?"

"Why, the king wouldn't even notice two commonplace girls, even should he see us, which he won't, for we can enter the royal garden by the lower gate and wait in that secluded place while the guard sends word to the princess."

The guard of the lower gate admitted the two girls without question as he had received orders to that effect. They waited near the tower end of a fortress where political prisoners were sometimes confined. Had they looked high enough they might have seen a pale young face pressed between the bars of a window slit. They were completely taken up however with the blossoms of a newly made

flower bed which they were admiring when the princess joined them.

"Yes, the blossoms are lovely," Cleomene agreed with her callers. "The king takes great pride in this garden, and keeps a caravan out seeking rare plants all the year around. The Persian roses have begun to bloom for the first time, yonder beside the tower, see?"

Roses were not native to Palestine, and the few that grew there came from far countries and were greatly treasured. The princess gave her friends a rose apiece, and as Zorah put out her hand to take hers a little wad of cloth struck her wrist and dropped to the silvery sands of the walk.

"Now where did that come from?" asked the princess in startled surprise.

"It is a fragment of a Jewish coat," declared Zorah. She then noticed a line of Hebrew script, in dark red pigment, on the lightest colored stripe of the ragged bit. "It is a message written in blood!" Slowly she spelled out the words. "In the tower prison. Please do get me free. Ira."

"That boy in the tower has dared to address

my friends," cried the princess with a gust of anger. "I had him seized for trying to get you into trouble, Zorah. His impudence will get him nothing but a sound beating."

"But Ira is our friend," replied Dinah, feeling duty bound to defend the boy if possible.

"He is my cousin," admitted Zorah frankly.

"All the more shame to him, then, for wanting to harm you. He wished the Roman police to raid your place for sheer spite. Of course you hadn't done anything unlawful, as I well know."

So Ira really had tried to betray the grotto secret! Zorah turned pale at the thought of such malice. "Dinah and I offended him without meaning to," she admitted, "and his hot temper got the best of him. I am sure he's sorry for his meanness by this time, because he isn't really bad. Won't you please, please, let him go for his family's sake?" she begged. "His parents are almost distracted with worry over his disappearance."

Cleomene yielded to Zorah's pleadings only because she loved the Hebrew girl, for

she cared nothing at all about what became of Ira.

She ordered him freed and brought into the garden so that she could give him a piece of her mind before sending him home. He was a sorry looking figure, shamed and frightened, with all his former boldness gone. He told his story humbly and truthfully, for he had had time to come to his senses and to realize how ill he had treated his best friends.

"He has learned his lesson," Zorah felt sure. "Please let him go home, now, Princess."

"He must do something to atone for his meanness toward you," insisted Cleomene. "Set him a hard task and let me know if he tries to get out of it, for then I'll surely have him seized again."

Zorah thought the matter over for a few silent moments. "I know what he must do, then," she stated. "We have a friend, Hanan, who was accused of having stolen a vial of costly perfume from a trader, though we are sure he is not guilty. Let Ira find out the facts and restore Hanan's good name."

"Very well. That task will keep him hard

at work for some time. You may go now," Cleomene granted the very crestfallen prisoner. "Be sure that I shall have you watched; so you had better do your very best to clear the name of Zorah's friend."

"Can I come back into the Grotto Band?" begged Ira of Zorah when he had thanked the disdainful princess for his release.

"When you have proved Hanan innocent. I have always suspected that you could have done that in the first place if you had cared enough about Hanan's welfare."

The princess kept her friends with her as long as she could that afternoon, for she was feeling anxious and blue. "I may go to Cæsarea soon," she finally stated. "The king has decided to live there for the rest of the year. He's in a very bad humor, and wants to start a war with the Zidonians who have displeased him somehow, and I don't want to go with him the least little bit. Besides I should be lonelier than ever so far away from you, my only friends in this strange land. Of course I must obey the king, and if he orders me to go with the royal party, I'll send you

word right away so that I may at least bid you both good-by."

A joyous surprise greeted the girls when they returned to their grotto. Two great food hampers had been brought up from the ravine cave during their absence. One contained corn from Egypt, a measure of lentils, and plenty of dried figs; the other was filled to the rim with delicious cooked food, roast fowl, oil cakes, barley bread, and jars of honey.

"Rezia and a friend of his brought the hampers," the refugees told Zorah. "They have gone down to the ravine to bring another load."

Presently Rezia came up the tunnel incline, huge parcel in arms, followed by a tall fine-looking stranger in Roman attire. "He looks somewhat like the boy of the bronze mask," Dinah said in an undertone to Zorah. "But, of course it cannot be Varro, for his face has no marks at all."

The boy heard the whisper and turned his ruddy face toward the entrance light so that she might see how perfectly free from plague marks it really was. "I am Varro," he told



"Of course it cannot be Varro."

her with a radiant smile. "The afternoon when you went to the temple court to pray for me, Zorah, I was healed by the power of Jesus Christ through the lightest touch of his disciple's hand.

"I was in danger of being trampled by the great crowd while I tried to reach the temple entrance, and would have given up in despair had not a stranger come to my help, surely a Believer, since he was so heavenly kind. He was of great strength, and his long arms raked a space open for me just as Peter came out pressed on all sides by the milling throng, and I was able to barely touch Peter's outstretched hand for an instant. Faith came with that light touch. All my being flooded with light and health and joy. I ran home almost bursting with gratitude and wonder. When I drew off my mask before my brothers, they could not believe their own eyes.

"My cure won them both to our faith. I say ours because I am now a Believer and always shall be. My brothers are your firm friends as you will soon discover, for they will give you every help you need. Even now they are getting together a flock of sheep for

a Roman shepherd to herd in the Kedron valley where he can keep foes away from your cave retreat."

Thus were the prayers of the young Christians answered.

Rezia and Varro soon became inseparable friends because they had much in common, and worked splendidly together for the Grotto refugees. In fact, a better team could not have been found in all the land. Ira worked just as hard until he had proved Hanan innocent, when Ira's father gave him a job that made him independent when he became of age. He had been made the scapegoat for two shrewd fellows who, when they had been all but cornered, had stealthily smeared a bit of their stolen perfume onto Hanan's coat, and the scent had convicted him.

Ira came back into the Grotto Band a better boy. His imprisonment seemed to have cleansed him of meanness. It also had opened his eyes to the virtues of his friends, and made him wish to be like them. He made the grotto into a cosy, liveable place, with a partitions, shelves, tables, and seats, and couches, little dreaming of how well his care-

ful work was to serve himself and his Christian friends years later when Titus razed Jerusalem completely, and killed over a million inhabitants and took the rest prisoners, all the rest save the Christians who escaped by the secret grotto tunnel after weeks of hiding in the grotto. These refugees made their way through the bleak Kedron Ravine by night, and finally settled in Gilead, a fertile and beautiful country west of the Jordan.

King Herod went to Cæsarea, as his niece had thought he would, and everyone who feared him breathed easier for his departure. Almost his first act in Cæsarea put an end to his wicked career. Arrayed in great splendor, and seated upon an equally splendid throne he made a vainglorious oration, and the people, knowing he expected worship, cried out with great fervor that he was a god and not a man.

Because the vain and wicked king accepted that worship, the angel of God smote him immediately and he died miserably, right there on his magnificent throne.

Herod's son took his place, but although he was a heathen, he admired and respected

nobility in others. It was this king, Agrippa, who said to Paul when the latter had finished his eloquent defense of Christianity before the Roman governor and the king, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

On the day when Herod's death was published in Jerusalem, Princess Cleomene sent for Zorah and Dinah because she was to go back to Rome. Her enemy was dead and she could safely go home to live, and although she was wildly happy, she wept when she bade her dear friends good-by and vowed she would never forget them even should she never see them again. Zorah insisted that she take the nightingale with her to Rome. They heard of her years afterward when she had gone to Paul in his Roman prison to inquire after her Jerusalem friends. Paul's teachings had converted her at the very time when Rome needed Christian citizens above everything else.

After Herod's death the brave little Grotto Band flourished more and more in zeal and usefulness and numbers. There were troubled times, of course, but they had many happy hours between the anxious ones. Rezia

remained the leading spirit of the band without arousing any jealousy from anyone because his companions all knew that it was the touch of Jesus that had set him above the others. The Grotto Band remained in favor with their Lord, rich in friendships and full of wholesome and happy activities.



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